

## Elegy for mental illness

Wild sarsaparilla on the bank, sprouting with abandon, sass and sweetness on the tongue, devil may care, ne'er do well, that here we come, like it or not. The vigor and the fervor. We are young and know no better.

This drowsy hatching of the cinnamon fern, its duckling-pose there all in down. The way the baby ducks moved in waves when we were small. Grandpa lifts the cage. One shift, the batch of them undulated like a wave, in/out of it, the roll and drift. Different direction, another tide.

But now here comes the wind off the lake. What was once soft and humid, chill and almost sharp. Rebuke of weather, no settling in. You close your eyes, and gone, gone the spring, here is summer. Such heated resin, scent of balsam poplar, honeybees gathering glue to seal the hive. The pollen in the air, faint, faint, and here was sweetness. Here the swelling of the belly, full. And all was languid on the grasses, all at once.

My parents in their love all night young under the stars, how fluid language moved them forward. Letters back and forth—they thought words would save them. Until they didn't. And with the death of words came the death of them. The death of my mother's words first, buried in her buried mind.

Oh mother, how I miss your words, their simple resurrection. When your words came back, they were all blunted. But still you had them in their plainness and their strength. Words like these trees. Balm of Gilead, healing ooze. Oh syrup, oh tincture—give me the wild cherry bark, licorice and honey for what ails the chest, willow and rosemary for our fevers and our bruises. Plants to heal the body, plants to keep the soul from seeping further.

You said you might come back a bird, so here I am whistling to the blue jay cocking its head out on the porch. Or butterfly—maybe you are a West Virginia white there on the two leafed toothwort, crinkleroot. Do I look for you in early spring, all white, black dots and edging on the forewing with stippling on the hind? The color of a blazer you would like. Are you perched there on the lakeshore posing? Gone in to dinner or for tea.

I am lost—for all this time, those years when you were gone, you still were on the earth. And now I am not sure, just know I seem to need a rooted gesture here to find you, bracken underneath the beech, its structured spine, fiddleheads, an eagle's claw, leaflets delicate, fronds so broad they could be thatch. I need a home until you're back. Underneath the trees, I'll fold into the fern and ride the seasons like a song that patters in the leaves, a rhythm pocked and simple, as thick as memory and just as long.